

The Babel of Dance Literacy: Reflections on the Heterogeneity of Dance Notations in Mid-twentieth Century North America

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I. Introduction

The North American dance notation field was in flux during the mid-twentieth century. Between the 1920s and 1970s, several movement notation systems such as those of Norman Alexander, Sole Babitz, Leticia Jay, Valerie Sutton, Alwin Nikolais, Eugene Loring emerged in America, while other systems from abroad, such as the Zorn, Labanotation, and Benesh were also introduced. These systems elicited considerable interest among dancers, and some were taught at schools and studios with accompanying textbooks or pamphlets. Referring to this multiplicity as “Babel,” John Martin comments that, “Though there should be several different camps, one practicing the Laban method, another the Zorn method, and another something else, it would

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still be an improvement over the present situation. Even Babel is preferable to illiteracy.”¹⁾ Given Labanotation’s current domination of the North American dance field centering on the academic scene, the heterogeneous, diffused and fluid notation field at that time invites us to rethink the epistemological issues regarding dance literacy.

In this paper, I interrogate the two phenomena of dance literacy in the mid-twentieth century North American dance field: 1) how Labanotation soon became the most powerful notation system, and 2) how other notation systems and film formed a sense of antagonism to Labanotation’s predominance, and what their existence suggests in terms of dance literacy politics. Rather than judging whether Labanotation is intrinsically superior to the other systems, I am more interested in understanding the discourse of “dance literacy” undergirding the rise of dance notation discourse and the rivalry between its disparate sectors. I argue that the rise of Labanotation as the dominant form of dance notation was not only empowered by the systematic and legitimizing sociocultural promotion of its supporters but also by the modernist epistemology privileging notions of universality; however, the existence of other notation systems and film formed a kind of antagonism against the dominance of Labanotation disclosing epistemological schisms within dance literacy.

In Korean dance academe, dance notation became one of the most productive subfields since the 1990s.²⁾ Out of the sizable literature pouring out each year on dance notation, preservation and related matters, it is possible to

1) John Martin(1942). Quoted from “The History of Dance Notation: Conclusion,” Nancy Brock, *Dance Observer* 9(2), March, p. 38.

2) The productivity in the field of dance notation is well observable in the prolific activities of the Korea Society for Dance Documentation. Established in 2001, the Society played a critical role promoting the significance of documentation, and encouraging continuous dialogues via its journals, symposiums, and seminars. In particular its journal, *The Korea Journal of Dance Documentation*, provides rich and diverse inquiries on dance preservation and literacy.

discern a few popular research topics. First, many studies aim to understand extinct dance forms via notation and other historical records. Many works analyzing traditional dance forms and repertoires documented in court documents and traditional notation systems are included here.³⁾ Second, another popular topic is to envision technological possibilities using various computer-generated software programs.⁴⁾ Third, applying Labanotation and Laban-related methods to Korean traditional dance is also a popular topic. These studies attempt to notate or analyze Korean traditional dance via Labanotation not only to understand its kinetic characteristics but also to interrogate problems, possibilities, and limitations emerging out of this translation. Si Hyun Yoo's notation and analysis of *Salpuri* using Labanotation,⁵⁾ and Jae Lee Kim's analysis of *Choyongmu* using LMA⁶⁾ are examples in case.

As I single out as the major tool of analyzing Korean dance Labanotation and Laban-related methods, including Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) or Effort-Shape, the predominance of Labanotation in Korean dance academe amongst imported notation systems is apparent. What is of interest is that if Labanotation, as this study will show, had slowly formulated out of extensive

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- 3) 다음과 같은 연구가 그 대표적 예이다. 손선숙(2007). 정재무보체계의 보완과 방안마련 연구,1: 「몽금척」 정재의 대형을 중심으로. 『무용예술학연구』 제20집, pp.179-210; 김영숙(1993). 조선조(朝鮮朝) 초기(初期)의 궁중무(宮中舞) : 몽금척(夢金尺)을 중심으로. 『한국미래춤학회연구논문집』 1집, pp.40-64.
- 4) 다음과 같은 연구가 그 대표적 예이다. 김주영(2006). 무용의 멀티미디어화 활용방안연구. 공주대학교 석사학위논문; 신상미, 김미애(2004). 무용과 컴퓨터의 만남 : Laban writer와 life forms 소프트웨어를 중심으로. 『한국무용기록학회지』 제6호, pp.69-91; 전미현, 조양숙, 조세홍(2003). 한국무용의 과학적 기록을 위한 멀티미디어 기술의 적용. 『한국무용기록학회지』 제3호, pp.185-201.
- 5) Yoo, Si-Hyun(1995). Young-Sook Han's *Salpuri Chum: Labanotation and Stylistic Analysis of a Traditional Korean Dance*. M. A. Thesis of the Ohio State University. 논문의 통일성을 위해 이하 한국저자들의 성명의 표기법을 통일시킨다.
- 6) 김재리(2004). LMA를 통한 처용무의 움직임 분석 연구. 『한국무용기록학회지』 제7호, pp.1-33.

reflections and revisions by numerous researchers in the West, it was introduced to Korean dance field as a methodological tool ready to use. Inevitably, what lacks in the growing literature on Labanotation is more critical and reflexive reconsideration. While there exist a few exceptional studies providing a comprehensive and critical overview of dance documentation, such as those of Hae Ree Choi⁷⁾ and Si Hyun Yoo,⁸⁾ the goal of most studies largely remains on the practical application of a specific notation system while glancing over the sociocultural and discursive aspects of dance literacy. According to the practical and methodological viewpoint, the competitions between various notation systems and film in American sociocultural context that this study sheds light on might seem mere a transitional chaos before Labanotation took the hegemony of the scene. However, interrogating what this hybridity of dance literacy aspires to, this study will provide new insight on the issue of dance literacy beyond the pragmatic and methodological paradigm. Therefore, while researches on dance notation abound in Korean dance academe, the rationale of this study is found in that attempts to historicize and even politicize the phenomena in the larger context are still in demand.

This is a historical research, influenced by postmodernist and interdisciplinary theories on history and dance. While accepting postmodernist challenge that has called into question much of what historians might once have taken for granted, such as the truth of the past, the connection between actual things and their representations, and the possibility of the historian remaining objective, my choice of research topic, the rise of Labanotation and other systems shadowed by it, also reflects postmodernist historicity to challenge canon and allow multiple voices as alternatives to it.

7) 최해리(2001). 한국 무용기록의 역사와 전망. 『한국무용기록학회지』 창간호, pp.77-106.

8) 유시현(2001). 라바노테이션이 내포하는 무용정신. 『무용예술학연구』 제7집, pp. 29-54.

Notation systems are not just neutral, objective tools that are available for use; they are human constructions revealing inventors' and users' desires and thoughts. In this regards, although various notation systems may seem anachronism to our eyes that are accustomed to the dominance of Labanotation, and although the rivalry between notation and film seems outdated compared to the current technological achievements such as motion-capture technologies, the rationale to focus on old and even obsolete notation forms is that they are cultural phenomena that invite philosophical and epistemological interrogations.

II. Preservation Discourse

While there is evidence of some sense that action, including dance, was recorded from the early history of human civilization, the ephemeral nature of dance and the lack of a practical method for notating dance had been lamented among dancers at least since the era of French court ballet in the sixteenth century in the West.⁹⁾ The lack of efficient notation system was understood not only as a condition of inconvenience, but also a sign of the insignificant status of dance. Given the privileged status of the written and recorded form within Western epistemology, dance as a nonverbal practice could not guarantee its knowledge basis or its existence in the future. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor attributes this condition to the differentiation of “archive” and “repertoire.”¹⁰⁾ While the archive is the domain of enduring material objects such as texts, documents, and buildings, the repertoire is represented by ephemeral and embodied practices such as dance. Since the archival memory

9) Alfonso Josephs Sheafe(1940). “Choreography: Why is No Effort Made to Record the Dances of Our Period?” the *American Dancer*, April, p.16.

10) Diana Taylor(2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press), p.1.

to restore and even preserve the works grew, especially after the 1950s when these dancers could no longer perform in their original roles.

Taylor's concepts of "archive" and "repertoire" help explain why modern dancers, in particular, have been concerned with preservation. It is because the characteristics of early modern dance were closer to the repertoire than the archive. Ballet or social dances had a relatively stable and agreed-upon terminology, method, and movement system as well as a method of passing the works along, one generation teaching the next; notation therefore could be carried out with abbreviated notes and simple drawings. In comparison, modern dance was regarded as a dancer's personal expression via idiosyncratic movement, which could not be easily described with a few words or symbols. Since movement itself became more important in modern dance than plot, costume, and other production details, an ironic situation arose as movement became more significant yet less articulate when discussing modern dance. This explains why modern dancers and their supporters, such as John Martin, were more interested in notation than ballet dancers. And it also explains why it was mostly modern dancers that participated in the first classes given on notation in the North America.¹⁴⁾

Moreover, modern dance not only influenced the preservation discourse but was also influenced by it, as modern dance had to undergo an epistemological shift in which choreography was isolated from both the choreographer and dancer. Although it was once unimaginable to think of Martha Graham's work without her presence in it, and although Graham herself perceived her works as personal statements and preferred to make a new dance rather than toiling over a forgotten old piece, she could not help but respond to the mounting pressure from the dance community as it tried to document her works once her retirement was inevitable. It was slowly accepted that modern dance works

14) Sol Babitz(1940). "Dance Notation at U.C.L.A.," the *Dance Observer*, December, p.143.

was considered the most authoritative form of knowledge in Western episteme, it became the ontological basis for dance notation, marking the effort to transform dance from an ephemeral to an enduring practice.

In the long and dispersed history of dance notation systems in the West, the turning point occurred at the turn of the twentieth century when the formation of a preservation discourse was stimulated by the maturation of dance as art. Dance as an artwork became the intellectual property of a choreographer that should be protected and preserved. Inventing his own notation system called “Choroscript”, Alwin Nikolais expressed the rationale as follows: “To any dancer who has ever given his profession serious thought, the grim consequences of the ‘illiteracy’ of his art are apparent.”¹¹⁾

In the context of American dance field, the significance of an artist and his work of art became the fundamental rationale for preserving dance, especially when the first generation of American modern dance aged and their works, once considered groundbreaking, were infrequently performed and even forgotten by the 1940s. The fear of losing the achievements of great artists compelled the dance community to consider what to do to prevent the total loss of these works. The need to preserve the “important” modern dance works seemed evident, at least to John Martin as he argued “the marvelous creative work that she [Humphrey] has given us be in some form where it can outlive the limits of our time.”¹²⁾ This sense of time and fear of loss compelled a student to ask Humphrey “with a mixture of horror and despair in her voice,” “What will happen to your dance works if you don’t do them again? Do you mean to say they will be lost forever?”¹³⁾ Although choreographers were not equally eager to restage their older dance works, these pressures and demands

11) Glen Tetley(1948). “Status of Notation: ‘Choroscript,’” *Dance Observer*, November, p.116.

12) John Martin(1959). Quoted in “Is it possible to have a permanent record of Doris Humphrey’s works?” Author unspecified, *Dance Magazine*, p.27.

13) Ann Hutchinson(1949). “Adventure in Notation,” the *Dance Observer*, January, p. 4.

could be performed by dancers other than the original casts or the choreographer herself, and even that the work could be preserved in its original state when separated from a specific dancer's interpretation. Sol Babitz, who taught his own notation system at U.C.L.A. in 1940, foresaw that the progress of modern dance was tied up with the progress of notation, in that notation enabled two different dancers to perform a modern composition without compromising the integrity of the work. He envisioned that modern dance should achieve the "homogeneity" of ballet if it were to become a more popular and significant dance phenomenon in American culture.

Preservation discourse informed by the concept of dance as art resulted in enlivened interest in dance notation systems. Yet, what was neglected in the boom of dance notation was the convention of dance descriptions in the North American dance field. Since its publication in 1927, the *American Dancer* had printed descriptions of various genres of dance almost every month, which were then compiled and sold well into the 1950s. The dance descriptions, usually accompanied by illustrations or photographs, were written by famous dance masters for other dance teachers to enrich their teaching repertoires. However, what should be interrogated is that dance descriptions were largely ignored in the discussion of notation, although a dance work was literally "written down" step-by-step in those descriptions. Since recording methods were idiosyncratic in each dance description without any systematic or overarching rules, there existed no apparent relevance between dance descriptions and notations.¹⁵⁾ Nevertheless, it seems that not only forms but

15) The methodological disparities are well represented in the contrast between the two descriptions published in the March 1932 issue of the *American Dancer*, "Eastern Fantasia" and "An Irish Jig for St. Patrick's Day". The former provided detailed descriptions of "oriental" movements such as "Swing hips slowly to left" and "Make slow rond de jamb on floor with left foot, toe turned in, step on left foot," while the latter defined a few crucial terms, such as step, stomp, brush, forward double, and pickup, and then described dance as a neat chart of those terms. These disparities were influenced not only by the characteristics

also contents of those descriptions contributed to their insignificance. Although advertised as created by “well-known” masters, the dances described were merely exercises or ordinary dance numbers instead of being approved art works. Accompanied with descriptions of music, costume, makeup as well as advice on directing, the descriptions presupposed the possibility of performance by students and the use by any dance teacher. Since they were not considered works of art or the property of a choreographer to be protected, they were considered less significant in the mechanism of the art dance field.

In comparison, notation was expected to preserve “great” art works and to do it in a systemic fashion. It no longer served mere synchronic and pragmatic purposes, but undertook a diachronic and historical role to preserve the achievements of that era and communicate them to the future. In this sense, the discursive turn of dance preservation was not only a matter of practicality, but also an ideological transition grounded in the fundamental reconsideration of contemporary dance practice. The rupture between dance description and notation occurred not because certain methodologies were outdated, but because the purpose of describing dance was changed. An article called “Choregraphy [sic]” published in 1940 reveals this transition.¹⁶⁾ Distinguishing “choregraphy” as the art of describing dance from “choreography” as the art of creating dance, the author asked whether they had really advanced from the practices of the French court more than two centuries ago in terms of choregraphy. Although it sounded like a methodological lamentation, his interrogation was in fact ideological. As is clear from its subtitle, “Why is no effort made to record the dances of our period,” the article presupposed the

of the dance genre described, but also by the individual masters’ preferences and perspectives.

16) Alfonso Josephs Sheafe(1940). pp. 16, 38.

historical dimension of dance and further reprimanded contemporary dancers for neglecting their historical responsibilities. The provocation of “Do we lack pride in the achievements of the dancers of our time?” necessarily presupposed the existence of valuable works of dance and the responsibility to recognize and transfer contemporary achievements to future generations. In that sense, preservation discourse was closely related to the growing signification of art dance as the heritage of the entire dance field.

The preservation discourse invoked by the growth of dance as art resulted in the boom of various notation systems especially in the mid-twentieth century in North America. Several notation systems, including those of Norman Alexander, Sole Babitz, Leticia Jay, and Valerie Sutton emerged in the U.S., while other systems from abroad were also introduced. These systems were advertised and discussed in dance periodicals with considerable interest, and some were taught at schools and studios with accompanying textbooks or pamphlets, to the extent that John Martin referred to this heterogeneous state as “Babel.”

This heterogeneity, however, was viewed as an obstacle to be overcome in order to maximize the benefits of notation. Comparing Laban’s and Nikolais’s systems, Glen Tetley argued that the diffused field of notation should become unified. He even suggested that “a driving force [would] be made through the facilities of such a group as the National Dance Organization, or through some congress of dance educators,” because “[d]ance education and the economic status of the dancer will be greatly affected by the recent developments in notation.”¹⁷⁾ Tetley contended that the investigation and adoption of a specific notation system was as important to the health of the dance field as was the pressure for a choreographer to notate a dance. The drive for unification provided the platform for Labanotation to gain dominance over the

17) Glen Tetley(1948). p.117.

heterogeneous notation field.

III. The Rise of Labanotation and the Challenges toward It

Labanotation—the abstract symbol notation system invented by German dance scholar Rudolf von Laban in the late 1920s—was introduced to North America in the 1930s by his two pupils Ann Hutchinson and Helen Priest. It was promoted as the most effective method to record any dance genre, and even to record any human movement beyond dance practice. Its proponents argued that, “There is no movement that cannot be written in the Laban system of notation.”¹⁸⁾ Compared to other systems that recorded limited elements of just one or a few dances, Labanotation seemed flexible, efficient and universal enough to act as a representative for the whole dance field.

The rapid rise of Labanotation can be attributed to its proponents’ macroscopic and contextualized approach to the notation field. Unlike the inventors or followers of other systems who advocated only their own systems, the proponents of Labanotation tried to comprehend other existing notation systems while contextualizing Labanotation within the history of notation. Its early advocates, including Hutchinson and Priest as well as Irma Otte-Betz, Juana de Laban, Nancy Brock and Jessie Burchess, published articles on notation in dance periodicals throughout the 1940s and 1950s. While some focused on introducing Laban and his method in depth, many of

18) The editors of the *Dance Notation Record*, Leipzig 1928. Quoted from “Introduction to Dance Notation,” Juana de Laban(1946). *Dance Index* 5 (4-5), April-May p.125.

19) Nancy Brock’s three-part overview and Juana de Laban’s 40-page-long monograph, both of which traced the history of notation from the 15th century and concluded with Labanotation, were examples. Nancy Brock(1941). “The History of Dance Notation,” part 1-3, *Dance Observer*, November, pp.116-117; Jan 1942, pp.8-9; March 1942, pp.36-38; Juana de Laban(1946). “Introduction to Dance Notation,” *Dance Index* 5 (4-5), April-May pp.89-132.

them gave overviews of the genealogy of dance notation and clarified the characteristics of Labanotation in comparison to other systems.¹⁹⁾ Yet the purpose of contextualizing lay not so much in relativizing Labanotation as in promoting what they believed was its superiority and improvements over other systems in use at the time. Maria Nicholson's statement that "after careful comparisons with all known systems, ranging from Feuillet and Nijinsky though Schillinger and Pierre Conté, Labanotation was chosen as the only one which was universally applicable, easily written and understood, and soundly based in mathematical theory,"²⁰⁾ is an example of using contextualization as the primary tool to promote Labanotation's superiority in the evolution of dance notation.

Labanotation was rapidly institutionalized due to its proponents' collective efforts to regulate and standardize the field of notation. The *Dance Notation Bureau* was established in 1940 in New York as the authorized branch of the Laban Archives in England, and began publishing a quarterly periodical, the *Dance Notation Record*, in 1943. Its aim was not only to notate, to teach and certify the teaching of notation, and to standardize Labanotation, but also to "act as a clearing house, research and work center" for the whole notation field.²¹⁾ Labanotation quickly acquired prestige as the most representative notation system. When Hanya Holm's Labanotation scores for her dances in *Kiss Me, Kate* were granted the first copyright for a dance score by the U.S. government in 1952, Labanotation became the official method of notation for dance material submitted to the government for federal copyright.²²⁾ Indeed, granting

20) Maria Nicholson(1956). "Correspondence: More about Dance Notation," *Dance Observer*, April, p.54.

21) Ann Hutchinson(1950). "The Dance Notation Bureau: Tenth Anniversary," *Dance Observer*, May, p.70.

22) Ann Hutchinson(1956). "The Dance Notation Field Here and Abroad," *Dance Magazine*, November, p.36.

23) Lucy Wilder(1956). "U.S. Government Grants First Dance Copyright," *Dance Observer*, May, p.69.

a copyright for a dance score was not possible without the existence of a widely accepted notation system, and this event was understood as acknowledging that if “the dance is literate, then it must be very literate indeed.”²³⁾

Despite the rapid successes, Labanotation did not become the sole legitimate, “universal” dance language as was originally intended, and it is arguable whether there will ever be one. Rather, Labanotation was at the position constantly competing with other notation systems and film to take the theoretical dominance.²⁴⁾ While eventually overshadowed by Labanotation, various notation systems kept appearing in the North American dance field between the 1940s and 1970s. It is true that proponents of Labanotation viewed them as a step backwards in the legitimization and standardization of dance literacy as none ever achieved the integral sophistication and social influence of Labanotation. Yet, tenuous yet persistent challenges of other notation systems against Labanotation and the long lasted rivalry between film and Labanotation could yield a productive insight on the issue of dance literacy.

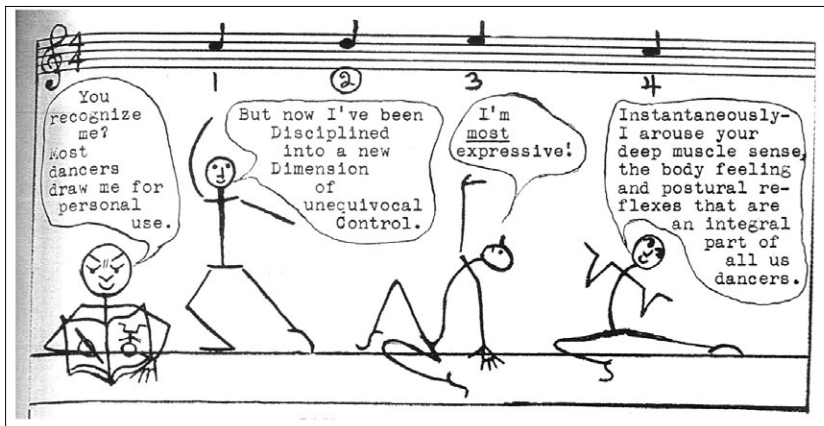
Notation systems that were either invented or used contemporaneously with Labanotation are disparate in their aims and characteristics. However, when interrogated retrospectively, it is possible to discern two strands of challenges that these notation systems posed against Labanotation. First, visual methods challenged the high intellectual barrier of symbolic systems. When Labanotation gradually gained dominance in the North American dance field, there emerged several simple visual methods, to the extent that the 1950s was

24) Despite being overshadowed by Labanotation, the diversity of dance notation in the North American dance field was maintained to inspire the formation of the International Movement Notation Alliance in 1984. Raising public awareness and offering conferences, its membership pool includes Labanotation, Benesh Movement Notation, Eshkol-Wachmann Movement Notation, Effort-Shape Phrase Writing, Motif Writing, Sutton Movement Writing, Kahnnotation and even Feuillet-Beauchamps Notation.

25) Ann Hutchinson Guest(1989). p. 34.

referred as the era of the revival of stick figures.²⁵⁾ Visual methods were based on the assumption that they were more accessible since they were a graphic rendition of the dancing body. The Zorn method was advertised as “easy to draw, easy to learn, easy to read,” while the Jay method defended their use of stick figures by arguing that most dancers use them for their personal use. Labanotation proponents, in particular, criticized visual methods such as stick figures as a regression in the evolution of dance literacy. John Martin referred to the Benesh method as “a reversion to the primitive method of ‘stick figure’”²⁶⁾ while Ann Hutchinson said the Jay method was “not yet past the first stages in becoming a formulated system.”²⁷⁾ In comparison, they praised that abstract symbol systems such as Labanotation were objective and scientific and, thus, universal.

The antagonism between Labanotation and other visual methods are also



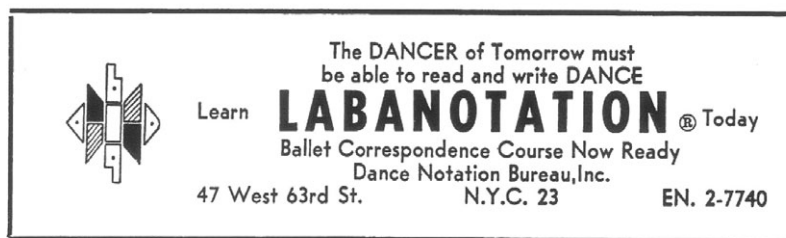
Picture 1. Advertisement of Jay notation²⁸⁾

26) John Martin(1957). “Dance: Notation Campaign: New Benesh System Being Widely Promoted by official British Agencies Program of the Week,” *the New York Times*, May 12, p. X8.

27) Ann Hutchinson(1956), p.58.

28) *Dance Observer*, Aug-Sep, 1956.

29) *Dance Observer*, March, 1960.



Picture 2. Advertisement of Dance Notation Bureau²⁹⁾

clearly represented in their advertising strategies. As seen in Picture 1, Jay method emphasizes familiarity and accessibility, by presenting intentionally crude hand-drawn stickman talking directly to dancers as its readers. In doing so, it advocates not only that stick figures are already common in most dancers' daily practices but also that these visual figures arouses deep muscle sense of dancer readers. In comparison, Labanotation's advertisement (Picture 2.) reveals its controlled, refined, and sophisticated approaches to dance notation, whose notating methodology is not immediately recognizable from the geometrical emblem of its symbols. Its future-oriented message—"The dancers of tomorrow must be able to read and write dance. Learn Labanotation today"—implies the difficulty of acquiring the method, and urges dancers not to depend on the unsystematic scribbles and drawings.

However, what Labanotation proponents ignored was that abstract symbols could also be discriminative, making those who do not know its matrix functionally illiterate. The target audiences of the visual methods were those who were interested in dance literacy but unable or unwilling to work with Labanotation. The crude hand drawings of stick figures in the Jay method's advertisements were particularly illustrative of the public's reservations about abstract symbols. Although these visual methods seldom reached the level of reliability and sophistication of Labanotation, their emphasis on kinesthetic resonance reveals that literacy necessitates disjunction from embodied practice

of dance making and runs the risk of alienating ordinary dancers.

Second, the continuing rivalry between Benesh notation and Labanotation relativizes the ideological norm of dance literacy. While aforementioned visual methods were overshadowed by Labanotation in terms of their influences on the dance field, Benesh notation system, a system introduced from England, entered into rivalry with Labanotation not only in the North America but also internationally. As mentioned earlier, early Labanotation supporters criticized the Benesh, as it was a system based on abbreviated graphic symbols. However, supported by the British Council immediately after its invention in 1956, the Benesh system stirred rivalry that was well documented in the correspondences between two parties published in the *Dance Observer* in the late 1950s.

While it is not the intent of this study to examine which system is intrinsically better than the other, the rivalry between the two systems reveals that the concept of dance literacy is relative intrinsically as well as extrinsically but also contextually. If the Benesh notation was characterized as “very good short hand,” Labanotation was “very good longhand.” In other words, the Benesh system was criticized for being “unscholarly,” while Labanotation was considered “laborious drudgery.”³⁰⁾ Also, Benesh notation is grounded in Northern Europe and the dance companies related to the Royal Ballet tradition, while Labanotation is firmly rooted in university dance departments

30) For further information on the history of the rivalry between Benesh notation and Labanotation, see Brendan McCarthy(2008). “Scoreless Draw?: Dance notation,” *Dance Now*, Summer, pp.71-80.

31) Helen Priest Rogers, a former president of the Dance Notation Bureau, conducted film-notation projects at the Connecticut College Summer School of Dance in the 1950s. The National Dance Notation Conference included a panel discussion on filming of dance in 1960, while the Notation Bureau installed a Video Recording Program in 1971 to save money and time in filming dance by using a notational “blueprint.” Marian Van Tuyl(1960). “Preface,” *Impulse*, p.1; Katherine S. Cunningham(1971). “From Page to Stage: Recording dance for the future,” *Dance Magazine*, June p. 34.

in North America.

Meanwhile, if the competition between Labanotation and other notation systems reveals heterogeneous conceptions of dance literacy, the conceptual conflict between film and notation reveals distinctive preservation discourses of notation and film. In practice, dancers, including Labanotation supporters, used both film and notation indiscriminately as far as they contributed to preserve any slice of the oeuvre.³¹⁾ Nevertheless, the conceptual gap between film and notation could not be ignored, especially for Labanotation supporters who argued that film could never substitute for notation. Compared to film's indiscriminate rendering of a performance, notation was thought to extract the essential part of the choreography from a dancer's embodied interpretation, and thus was considered to be more pure and fundamental. Rudolf von Laban explained that photography and film were movement-recording of the "imprint" kind, while referring to "[a] genuine dance notation" as "the representation through the use of symbols, of ideas which are expressed by movement."³²⁾ John Martin also enthusiastically defended notation against the "superficial belief that the ideal way to record a dance composition for reproduction is by means of the motion picture camera."³³⁾ In his view, notation recorded a composition while film recorded a performance that was inseparable from the dancer's shortcomings and interpretations. In other words, film was to phonographic records what notation was to musical scores. Although Martin regarded it as a "great negative argument that arises again and again against notation,"³⁴⁾ the persistent interest in film as a preserving tool points to the epistemological gap between the symbolic concept of dance

32) Rudolf von Laban(1946). "A Message on Dance Notation," *Dance Index*, April-May, p.128. Italic added.

33) John Martin(1950). "They Score a Dance as Other Do Music," the *New York Times*, July 2, p.SM6.

34) John Martin(1944). "The Dance: Concerning Notation," the *New York Times*, Feb. 20, p.X2.

35) Glen Tetley(1948). p.117.

literacy and the photographic recognizability of film. While it is impossible to conclude that either visual methods or film are better than Labanotation as a system of dance literacy, the two reveal disparate needs, concerns, and desires in the dance community that need to be acknowledged.

IV. Further Discussions on Dance Literacy

What penetrates the phenomena of the rise of Labanotation and the challenges of other notation systems and film is the concept of dance literacy. If dance literacy could be understood as the ability to “read and write” dance, notation systems were believed to “prove dance can be literate.”³⁵⁾ What is notable is that Labanotation supporters, amongst others, particularly advocated the concept of dance literacy. For example, the Dance Notation Bureau adopted the following catchphrase in its advertisement, “The dancer of tomorrow must be able to read and write dance. Learn Labanotation today.”³⁶⁾ Also, Selma Jeanne Cohen presented an analogy using linguistic structure and the movement inscription of Labanotation.³⁷⁾ Arguing that “[a]s a verbal language has parts of speech, so does dance,” Cohen compared a noun to the body, a verb to an action or movement, an adjective to the direction of movement, an adverb to the dynamic of movement, and so on. She went on to contend that, “We have a movement sentence because we have used a variety of words.” While her analogy may be overtly literal, this linguistic conceptualization of dance literacy revealed that dance notation aspired to

36) Dance Notation Bureau, Inc.(1960). Advertisement, *Dance Observer*, March, p.44.

37) Selma Jeanne Cohen(1954). “A Language for Dancers,” *Dance Observer*, April, pp.53-54.

38) Diana Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

39) Linda J. Tomko(1999). “Dance Notation and Cultural Agency: A Meditation Spurred by Chreographics,” *Dance Research Journal* 31(1) Spring, pp.1-4.

become a pseudo-language in accordance with the “writing = memory/knowledge equation [that] is central to Western epistemology.”³⁸⁾ Given this criteria, Labanotation’s complicated grammar and rich vocabulary, though criticized as difficult to master, was viewed as evidence of the system’s superiority to other methods, since it guaranteed a dance literature that could encompass the wide variety of genres, just as a fully developed language with rich vocabulary and subtle nuances encompasses a wide range of human expression.

This hope that Labanotation would be the Esperanto of dance literacy must be understood in the context of the modernist pursuit of the universal. Linda J. Tomko argues that this pursuit was important in Euro-American culture, making the universalist claims of Labanotation’s ability to record any ethnic, racial and personal movement trait familiar and accepted.³⁹⁾ However, claims towards universalism without a simultaneous acknowledgment of its limitedness and situated-ness run the risk of being criticized as “expansionist”⁴⁰⁾ and even “colonialist.”⁴¹⁾ As is apparent in the improvised and personalized traits of contact improvisation or tanztheater that challenge the concept of choreography as the blueprint of a dance work, the wide spectrum of theater dance cannot be comfortably represented and preserved via a notation system. As Sally Ann Ness points out, the idea of an “objective” method that can describe dance in every culture and context becomes a target of criticism from postcolonial, post-structural, and critical perspectives.⁴²⁾ In a situation where no one notation system reigns as a prerequisite for dance making practice, an obsessive emphasis on dance literacy can potentially fail

40) Michel de Certeau(1992). *The Writing of History*. Quoted from *The Archive and Repertoire*, Diana Taylor, p.19.

41) Mary Ann Doane(2002). p.3.

42) Sally Ann Ness(1996). “Observing the Evidence Fail: Difference Arising from Objectification in Cross-Cultural Studies of Dance,” *Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*, edited by Gay Morris (London and New York: Routledge), pp.245-269.

to take into account its political effects on the various groups within the field.

Furthermore, it is important to interrogate the paradigmatic notion that dance literacy is essential for the future of dance. Instead, it must be asked, for whom and what purpose dance literacy serves. As well, it is necessary to call into question the imagined future that is under discussion. Though dance notation has certainly opened up many possibilities by codifying nonverbal dance practice into a linguistic utterance, a rigorous and coercive pursuit of notation as a universal norm overshadows more subtle and complicated consequences of dance literacy. Two realms of inquiry must further be explored. The first is the fluid and heterogeneous manifestations within dance literacy; the second concerns the issue of how to acknowledge the embodied practice of dance beyond literacy. While the Babel-like preponderance of diverse dance notation systems was viewed in the mid-twentieth century as indicative of a lack of a universal language, it is now clear that these different systems opened up multiple points of entry to the ways that dance is understood. As a text of performative knowledge, notation—whether a traditional system in one particular culture or a newly invented one by an individual—reveals much about the way dance is conceived, perceived, and analyzed in its specific socio-cultural context. The differences between various systems create room for imaginative possibilities. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that a linguistic conception of dance literacy is not the only way to transmit knowledge in dance practice. While early notation proponents saw the ephemeral and embodied transference between dancers as a limitation of dance, contemporary scholars, especially those in performance studies, emphasize its positive and revelatory power. It is only when the possibility of knowledge beyond the linguistic conception of dance literacy is recognized that the ephemeral, non-verbal, and non-reproducible qualities which dance produces and transmits will gain an equal epistemological footing.

V. Conclusion

This study revisits the heterogeneous and fluid manifestation of the mid-twentieth century North American dance notation field. Rethinking the modernist pursuit for universality which led to the ascendancy of Labanotation, I emphasize that an opened attitude toward dance literacy creates a space in which the ephemeral, non-verbal, and non-reproducible qualities that dance produces and transmits are acknowledged and validated.

If we accept that Labanotation represents the Western modernist epistemology desiring to read and write dance in a specific way, it seems to be required to have a more reflexive and critical attitude in accepting Labanotation as a mode of dance literacy in the context of twenty-first century Korea. This study's rationale to unearth forgotten voices and failed attempts in the North American dance notation field was to remind that the issue of dance literacy was not only technical and practical but also discursive and philosophical.

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국문 요약

무용쓰기의 바벨탑: 20세기 중반 미국 무용기록법의 다원성에 대한 고찰

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본 연구는 20세기 중반 미국무용계에 다양한 기록법들이 쏟아져 나와 흡사 “바벨탑”과 같이 혼재되고 역동적인 양상을 띠었다는 관찰에서 출발한다. 가장 두드러진 움직임은 다양한 기록법들 가운데 라바노테이션이 모든 춤을 기록할 수 있는 보편성과 철저함을 내세워 주류로 떠오르고 있었다는 것이다. 그럼에도 불구하고 보다 단순하고 시각적인 기록법들이 계속하여 등장하면서, 또한 대중화되기 시작한 필름과 비디오 역시 효과적인 무용기록법으로 각광받기 시작하면서 무용을 기록하고 보존하는 방식에 대한 논쟁이 다각적으로 진행되었다.

라바노테이션의 독주가 일반화된 오늘날의 관점에서 볼 때 이처럼 당시 혼재되고 역동적인 양상을 보인 무용기록법 분야는 두 가지 담론적 의문점을 제시한다. 어떠한 사회적 배경과 어떠한 방식으로 라바노테이션이 주류로 부각되게 되었는가, 그리고 그로 인해 라바노테이션과 다른 기록법 사이에 형성된 이념적 긴장이나 경쟁관계는 서양무용계가 일관되게 추구해온 무용을 읽고 쓰는 능력(dance literacy)에 대해 어떤 시사점을 가지는가이다. 이에 대해 본 연구는 내재적 해답찾기, 즉 라바노테이션 자체의 우수성을 증명하는 식의 방법론 보다는 라바노테이션이 주류로 떠오를 수 있었던 담론적 배경을 살펴봄으로써 기록법 전통에 내재된 모더니즘적 시각을 읽어내고자 한다. 예술무용, 특히 현대무용의 전통이 확립되면서 안무를 보존해야 할 필요성이 높아지고 단일화된 기록법이 요구되던 상황에서 모든 춤을 기록할 수 있다는 라바노테이션의 보편성은 당시 무용계 지식인들의 이론적 제도적 지지를 받으며 급속히 성장했다. 그러나 라바노테이션이 주류로 부각된 이후에도 계속하여 등장한 무용기록법들이 시각적 단순성과 즉각성을 전면에 내세워 라바노테이션에 도전했던 점 및 라바노테이션 지지자들이 필름을 기록법으로써 불충분하다고 비판했던 점을 고려한다면 무용쓰기를 하나의 이상형에 귀속시킬 수 없는 유동적이고 상대적 개념으로 새롭게 조명할 수 있다.

무용기록법이 다양한 테크놀로지 및 미디어와 결합하고 있는 오늘날 이러한 전통적 “쓰기” 혹은 “그리기” 방식의 기록법의 역사를 되짚어보는 의미는 무용기록법이 단순히 객관적이고 기술적인 고안물이 아니라 그것의

등장을 가능케 했던 담론에 내재된 욕망을 반영한다는 점에 있다. 무용기록법에 대한 기존 연구량이 상당함에도 불구하고 대부분 특정 기록법의 활용에 시에 머무르거나 기록법들간의 기술적 비교분석에 그치고 있다는 점은 무용을 쓰고 읽는 행위가 내포하는 사회문화적 담론이 간과되고 있음을 방증한다. 무용기록법은 단지 객관적으로 존재하는 기술체계가 아니며 그것이 누구를 위해 존재하고 기능하는가를 비판적으로 인식할 필요가 있음을 제안한다.

주제어: 무용쓰기 (Dance Literacy), 보존담론 (Preservation discourse), 라바노테이션 (Labanotation), 필름 (Film), 무용기록법 (Dance Notation)